

APPEARED
ON PAGE A23

WASHINGTON POST
14 April 1987

J Meg Greenfield

The Illusion of 'Security'

I don't know how old the woman was, but she was getting on—a grandmother, she was to say, and I thought: at least. This was about 15 years ago. We at The Washington Post had just put a greatly tightened security system in place. And there, in our innermost offices, stood the woman. She had long, loose gray hair. She was wearing those knee-high white boots, fashionable for the young at the time, and an orange satin miniskirt, the shortest I had ever seen. I don't remember what she was wearing on top because her arms were full of the live animals she was carrying, a huge, fat rabbit that was white and a small dog that had been dyed pink. It is said that one editor, looking up absently from a phone call when he saw her, screamed. I don't know. I know only how ironic it seemed to those of us who had been grouching that the new screening from downstairs was stopping the respectable, horn-rimmed souls who were coming to deliver their prospective op-ed pieces to us—"There is someone here who says he has a package you're expecting," the guard would tell us by phone, his voice heavy with sarcasm and disbelief. But, of course, the woman with the pink dog, he didn't call about her. She walked right through.

I have thought of that woman periodically over the years. She is to me Our Lady of the Security Illusion. I think of her whenever there is one of those famous breaching-the-gate debacles that, for some unfathomable reason, we continue to find astounding though they have become commonplace. I see her walking sportily out of the CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., for instance, carrying, in addition to her burden of livestock, the secret handbook on satellites that young Mr. Kampiles so easily got hold of and walked off with. I see her sitting at the foot of the Queen of England's bed, reassuring the sovereign that she and the dog and the rabbit are just there for a friendly little predawn chat. And now I see her lounging around inside that legendary security inner sanctum, the so-called "bubble" in our Moscow embassy, rearranging her long gray tresses in the reflection of its translucent plastic walls while the dog and the rabbit frolic about, making funny noises into hidden receivers.

The CIA headquarters, Buckingham Palace, the American Embassy in Moscow—there are many more examples, but these serve the point best because they are popularly thought to be among the most rigorously guarded, secure premises in the world. That is the first part of the problem or, more precisely, of the illusion. The

military or paramilitary presence, all that special-door unlocking and marching up and down and standing at attention and changing the guard and God knows what all else creates an aura of ferocious commitment and thoroughness when neither may in fact exist. Things only *look* well guarded. The place turns out to be an easy mark.

This, of course, is not some wholly contemporary phenomenon. Since Biblical days, since Troy, we have an entertaining record of the unwanted and uninvited regularly insinuating their way through the gates, sometimes by the same reliable, if unimaginative, method used on our young Marines. What is distinctive to our times, I think, is the heavy new investment in barriers and checkpoints and guards and detours and the other cumbersome paraphernalia of the business that often create an unwarranted sense of security.

That misplaced, or at least too total and uncritical, faith in the capacity of a quasimilitary apparatus to maintain security where it is needed is only one of the reasons the effort so often fails. The human will to believe that somewhere, somehow an unbreachable line of defense can be

created is apparently indomitable, resisting all evidence and experience to the contrary. So the plan is drawn up; the gadgetry is installed; the guards are put in place; the concrete is poured, and something we grandly now dub a "system," as distinct from whatever makeshift thing preceded it, is born. It boasts not just more hardware and physical impediments to unauthorized entry than before, but also more rigorous checks and invariably (and fatally) what is thought to be an improved personnel staffing and consulting arrangement. Nothing has been left out, nothing forgotten. And then the first truckload of explosives rides right through, or the cabinet minister is abducted, or the White House domestic staff reports to the guards that a *most* peculiar person seems to be wandering unattended through the public rooms.

I don't suggest that all is failure—only that it happens enough to force a few conclusions. The more "rational" personnel plan tends to bring in all those persons who should ideally be consulted or play some part or be kept informed, and this winds up fragmenting authority and responsibility, leaving everyone with the idea that someone else is really in charge. It is no longer possible for anyone to see the whole. Process devours purpose, and worse, nobody knows that it is gone. The belt-plus-suspenders redundancies, thought to be such a good safeguard, can undermine security too. People will not long do that which is

Ref: 101

self-evidently unnecessary or unrealistic or unbearable or pointless; such things will not be enforced; but it will be officially assumed nonetheless that whatever danger they were meant to address is still, somehow, being averted.

As I understand it, for example, everyone in American embassies around the world knows that these Marines cannot be expected to abide by the monastic rules set for them, any more than guards at political conventions can really inspect the chaotic contents of every woman's handbag they perfunctorily open or than people who know each other well will continue observing the formal security rituals required of them in recurring daily circumstances. So people get very casual and cynical about these things. The system relaxes. The fraternization goes beyond sexuality to subversion, but this does not get perceived. The misleading aura of hup-two-three-four efficiency is still there.

I think our security practices have become, under pressure and under threat, overcomplicated, overbureaucratized, overmechanized and just plain overdone. We have squeezed common sense out of them. We don't need more "procedures" or more levels of accountability. We need a few people in the right places who have the wit to say, "This is the damn dumbest thing I ever saw," and the authority to do something about it.

©1987, Newsweek, Inc.

Reprinted by permission; all rights reserved.